

## THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS AND OUR THEOLOGICAL FUTURE

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*[The increasing interest in the entire history of exegesis invites analysis. The author surveys the variegated field and presents a critique. He then sketches out programmatically how the history of exegesis can become an integral part of biblical and theological studies, while preserving the central role of the historical-critical method.]*

THE PHENOMENON OF THE ENORMOUS new interest in the entire history of biblical exegesis raises questions as to its role in biblical studies, and in the theological enterprise in general.<sup>1</sup> This interest is shared by many who otherwise espouse very differing ideologies, expectations, and agenda. The discipline of the history of exegesis means different things to different people, and is taken over and used in different ways for a variegated range of purposes. Clarification of this basic issue is needed. If, then, the claim to be heard on the part of the history of exegesis is allowed, adjustment is needed on the part of biblical scholars to accommodate a new dialogue-partner that appears to be here to stay. The extension of the range of the historical-critical method to include the history of exegesis will ensure that the discipline remains both critical and historical.

### THE PHENOMENON

The history of exegesis has a history and there are variations to be noted, as the very notion of history changes. There has always been some interest, albeit smouldering at times, in the commentary tradition. We can see the awareness of the authority of their predecessors in the work of the earliest

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the phrase "history of exegesis" as a blanket term. I am not distinguishing strictly between history of exegesis/hermeneutics/interpretation/commentary and I admit that there is an overlap. For convenience, I view them all as mutually influential elements of the one phenomenon. The variety of terminology is also to be noted: history of exegesis/reception history/effective history.

commentators. Their views are quoted and taken up in subsequent commentary. Of course, this process is highly selective. Later generations can note that certain views are edited out at different periods by a series of sieves. These sieves come into play because of reasons ranging from ideological or polemical purpose to that of simple incomprehension.

A more explicit or formal actualization of a history of exegesis is seen in the emergence of *catenae*, first in the Greek-speaking East and then in the Latin-speaking West. Early medieval biblical commentary is characterized by the respectful repetition of the opinions of the Fathers, though this does not necessarily inhibit the expression of personal insight and opinion. Gradually, we see the glossed biblical text come into being, resulting in the marvelous *Glossa ordinaria* of the High Middle Ages. In a sense this represents the canonization of the history of exegesis, though I will later argue that some reservations are to kept in mind. A similar manifestation of the status of the history of exegesis is Pope Urban IV's commissioning of Thomas Aquinas in the middle of the 13th century to produce what would come to be known as the *Catena aurea*, a special sort of continuous commentary on the text of the Four Gospels drawn from the writings of the Latin and Greek Fathers.

Up to the Reformation, the concept and format of the *Glossa ordinaria* remained acceptable. It is frequently forgotten that the work of succeeding commentators such as Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349) and Paul of Burgos (ca. 1351–1435) were added to the accumulated wisdom of the past. Such accumulation is most often seen as merely the gradual accretions of history rather than a reflection of a judgment that such historical commentary belonged to the hermeneutical integrity of exegesis. Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, is an exceptional example of an exegete who reflected explicitly on the significance of the history of exegesis. M. S. Burrows's links Gerson's position with our thinking today: "[Gerson's] interest in an ecclesial exegesis that underscores the normative role of tradition reveals a thinker who understood that authoritative texts could not be read in isolation, that the text's posthistory also belongs to its meaning. He was not alone in this recognition. But his approach to tradition, or as suggested above, Scripture in tradition, moves us beyond an older polemical debate between Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians, anticipating what H.-G. Gadamer has called the "effective history" of texts as one vital dimension of a text's living voice. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

The *Glossa ordinaria* survived the transition from manuscript to the age of printing and continued to be printed in different editions into the 17th

<sup>2</sup> M. S. Burrows, "Gerson, Jean (1363–1429)," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 99–106, at 105.

century. However, this was not the only medium in which the history of exegesis continued to be attended to. The voluminous commentaries of Cornelius Lapidé (1567–1637), written in the *élan* of the Counter-Reformation, are characterized by a systematic tabling of the opinions of earlier commentators, especially the Fathers, on a verse-by-verse basis. In this regard Lapidé's commentaries remain a useful resource today.<sup>3</sup>

The Reformation's understanding of the biblical text, the influence of the Enlightenment, the rise of the historical-critical method, all combined to eliminate the history of exegesis from the biblical scholar's repertoire except in a very restricted sense. Until recently most of the histories of exegesis that have appeared in the last hundred years have concerned themselves with the history of the critical period, that is covering the period of approximately the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, W. Ward Gasque's *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* devotes 13 pages (of a total of 344) to what he terms "Precritical Study of the Book of Acts," and in this single chapter he covers the first 16 centuries of church history.<sup>4</sup> The same disproportion is generally to be seen in more recent works.

While the embers of interest in the more inclusive history of exegesis had become banked down, an extraordinary thing has occurred in the last twenty years or so. The smouldering embers have blazed up and become a veritable forest fire! I can refer here to only a sample of recent publications. A new facsimile edition of the *Glossa ordinaria* has appeared. Cardinal Newman's edition of a translation of the *Catena aurea* has been reissued.<sup>5</sup> Some volumes of a projected 27 volume series of *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* have already been published,<sup>6</sup> a series that bills itself as "a postcritical revival of the early commentary tradition known as the *glossa ordinaria*." It presents in English, the biblical text

<sup>3</sup> However, these commentaries need to be used with due caution. Lapidé's use of Jerome's "Commentary on Mark" is mistakenly taken over (albeit in an updated translation!) by the editors of the new *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*; see, e.g., on Mark 8:25, in Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, ed., *Mark, New Testament 2* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 109. Even at the time of Lapidé, the authenticity of this commentary had already been questioned. Modern scholarship ranks it as a pseudo-Jerome work (see *Expositio in Evangelium secundum Marcum*, ed. Michael Cahill [CCSL 82]).

<sup>4</sup> W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> *Biblia latina cum glossa ordinaria*, ed. K. Froehlich and M. T. Gibson, 4 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992); *Catena aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers by Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Southampton: Saint Austin, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, gen. ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).

amply annotated, verse by verse, with quotations from the Fathers, understood as encompassing the period up to 750. The production of the first critical editions and first-time translations of ancient commentaries is a growth industry.<sup>7</sup>

Ulrich Luz gets the credit for popularizing Gadamer's term, "Wirkungsgeschichte."<sup>8</sup> The term encompasses more than strictly exegesis, but for this reason reminds us that textual exegesis is not done in a vacuum. Markus Bockmuehl has argued eloquently "that New Testament scholars should actively adopt the history of the influence of the New Testament as an integral part of the exercise in which they are engaged. . . . In the process it ['effective history'] would enrich and cross-pollinate a great deal of insular academic discussion—providing a broader and less ephemeral base by reviving long-forgotten insights of exegesis and application, but without being forced to give hostages either to a one-dimensional 'history of the victors' or a revisionist veneration of all that was supposedly suppressed."<sup>9</sup>

Many studies are beginning to appear, the products of fresh research in the field. Mention may be made of *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* by Gerald Bray, and *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* edited by Donald K. McKim.<sup>10</sup> Though not evident from its title, the recently published *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* has a strong emphasis on the history of exegesis. The emphasis in this volume is clearly and designedly on the "last two centuries of interpretation."<sup>11</sup> Among the more specialized studies, Seán P. Kealy's two-volume encyclopedic survey in his *Matthew's Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation* maintains the trajectory of his earlier pioneering *Mark's Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation*.<sup>12</sup>

A revealing illustration of the fact that the history of exegesis has itself

<sup>7</sup> For example, it was my study of an early medieval Ps-Jerome commentary on Mark, noted above, that sparked my own interest in the pertinence of the history of exegesis to biblical scholarship today. See my translation of this commentary: *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation*, ed. Michael Cahill (New York: Oxford University, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> See particularly the opening and closing chapters of Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, "To Be Or Not To Be': The Possible Futures of New Testament Scholarship," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998) 271–306, at 295–96. He notes some key publications in this field, quoting R. Coggins's suggestive phrase, "Texts have an after-life. . ." (297, n. 24).

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996); *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) xlix.

<sup>12</sup> Seán P. Kealy, *Matthew's Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation*, 2

a history is the status of the category in the classified bibliographies of the discipline of biblical scholarship. The *Elenchus of Biblica* (formerly *Elenchus Bibliographicus Biblicus*) had a section “Historia Exegeseos” in the inaugural volume of *Biblica* (1920), but with very few entries. The category did not survive into the second volume. It made a brief reappearance only to vanish again in 1925. Subsequently, the more general category “Historia Scientiae Biblicae” subsumes the items dealing with the history of exegesis. In the 1980 issue (volume 61) the category “History of Exegesis” reappeared, while the category “Historia Scientiae Biblicae” remained in place. The restored “History of Exegesis” section is subdivided according to chronological periods, as it has continued up to the present. The bibliographical listings in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* introduced the category “Historia Exegeseos” in 1965 (volume 41). The next volume (42) alters the section-heading to “Methodus et Historia Exegeseos.” In 1973 (volume 49) the category is also found as a sub-section under New Testament. Subsequently with some minor alterations, the category of history of exegesis is found under Old and New Testaments up to the present. *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete* has had the category of *Auslegungsgeschichte* since the first volume (1954), with minor sub-division changes.

Generally speaking, the status of the history of exegesis category shows a definite crescendo in bibliographical resources.<sup>13</sup> While the bibliographical lists indicate a gradually increasing number of scholars working in the area of the history of exegesis, there is relatively little writing on the notion of the significance of the history as such. Notable exceptions occur, such as the first edition of Robert Grant’s *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* in 1965.<sup>14</sup>

### REASONS FOR NEW INTEREST

While interest in the history of exegesis is not an entirely new phenomenon, today’s degree of enthusiasm for the subject is something that needs to be accounted for. Some would say that the smouldering embers were fanned into flame by the winds of dissatisfaction—disillusionment with the

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vols. (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1997); Seán P. Kealy, *Mark’s Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> *Old Testament Abstracts* and *New Testament Abstracts* do not have a category of “History of Exegesis.” Interestingly, the very first number of NTA (1:1 [1956–57]) in the section “Periodical Abstracts” had a category named “History of Biblical Studies” which contained two items, but it was never used again.

<sup>14</sup> It has been reissued in a new edition: Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

predominance of the historical-critical method in biblical studies. Deeper reasons can be identified, especially because the sense of dissatisfaction that some have recorded is based on questionable premises. Cultural forces are at work broader than a dispute about any method used in a particular discipline. The age of postmodernism has arrived. A basic distinction is to be attended to at this point. Postmodernism is a feature of our academic, intellectual, and artistic culture today. I am not arguing that this is necessarily a good thing. I recognize it as an influence profoundly affecting all intellectual, hermeneutical, and even pastoral activity. Postmodern theory is an accurate articulation of the way the world is. Postmodernism at the very least signals a dissatisfaction.

Like it or not, as Edward O. Wilson reminds us about postmodernism, “it has seeped by now into the mainstream of the social sciences and humanities.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on, ironically, to salute “the unyielding critique of traditional scholarship it provides. We will always need postmodernists or their rebellious equivalents. For what better way to strengthen organized knowledge than continually to defend it from hostile forces?”<sup>16</sup> Wilson’s construal of postmodernism as a challenge (“Maybe, just maybe, you are wrong”<sup>17</sup>) is remarkably similar to the challenge I find in the history of exegesis. To read in the history of exegesis is to open oneself to what might be termed an experience of postmodernism. What postmodernism talks about, the history of exegesis illustrates and effects. The postmodern climate provides a window of opportunity for the history of exegesis.

This can be unsettling and challenging to dogmatic presuppositions. On the other hand, the richness of ambiguity is revealed. The *Glossa ordinaria* is an early version of hypertext, somewhat postmodernist in the sense of its egalitarian tabling of different views. It asks why is one period’s reading necessarily better than any other? Postmodernism draws explicit attention to something silent and implicit in the medieval format. A delightful parody of an extreme form of postmodernism has been penned by Robert P. Carroll:

Some forms of postmodern approach to biblical readings would insist on an egalitarian relationship between competing interpretations whereby everybody’s point of view must be respected and acknowledged as equal to everybody else’s point of view. . . . The future will be a paradise of different readings with none privileged and all equally valid: the postmodern lion will lie down with the postmodernist lamb, the Marxist bear will eat straw with the capitalist goat, the pre/postmodernist fundamentalist sheep will safely trade biblical proof-texts with the modernist wolf

<sup>15</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) 42.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

and the ecclesiastical dove will dwell in peace with the academic serpent. It will be a veritable paradise of (non)aggressive differing-but-equal biblical readings in which every man and every woman will sit under their own vine and fig tree undisturbed by any point of view alien to themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Yet a window is now opened. The relevance of this facet of our contemporary culture to biblical scholarship can be viewed more moderately, especially with the help of the historical-critical method. The shaking of the foundations has allowed the voice(s) from the history of exegesis to be heard with greater attention and respect. The age of postmodernism has certainly facilitated the entry and fresh interest in the history of exegesis. This is not to say that it provides the only rationale and justification for this new phenomenon, but a shift has been facilitated. Fundamental questions arise as to what validity these voices of the past have today in the task of exegesis as performed by today's biblical scholar. Postmodernism disposes us to the perception of the ambiguity or polyvalence of texts. In many ways the process and end-product of the canon can be recognized as essentially and strikingly postmodernist when viewed as holding in tension such a simultaneous diversity, as we see, for example, in studies like James Dunn's *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*.<sup>19</sup>

#### A PROTEAN DISCIPLINE

A wide spectrum of perception exists regarding the significance of the history of exegesis. It does not represent the same value for all. I thought of describing the phenomenon as a chameleon, but chameleons are slow moving and easy to catch once spotted. In trying to describe and even define the present-day phenomenon of interest in the history of biblical exegesis, I more easily imagined myself hunting Proteus! Proteus, you will recall, was a minor sea-god who worked for Poseidon and who shepherded flocks of seals. He had the ability to change his shape at will to avoid capture and also had the ability to prophesy usefully. I wish to capture Proteus to have him prophesy or speak to me of the role of the history of exegesis in biblical scholarship today.

The different shapes it assumes are due in part to history of exegesis being made to serve the needs of certain ideologies. The most glaring example of this is the somewhat paradoxical espousal of history fueled by a conservative rejection of some of the implications of the historical-critical method. Others are attracted to history of exegesis because of their

<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Carroll, "Poststructuralist Approaches: New Historicism and Postmodernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998) 50–66, at 61–62.

<sup>19</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990).

belief that it provides access to a more satisfying spiritual and pastoral application they find lacking in mainstream biblical scholarship.

What I term the protean quality of the resurgence in the history of exegesis has been documented by others. In a useful review essay of eight books, all written by North American or English Protestants, Roger Lundin draws attention to the different views of the history of exegesis. Some turn to the history of Enlightenment, some are seen as affirming that “‘precritical’ exegesis may well offer some invaluable guidance for how historical-critical exegesis may be employed alongside and in the service of a more holistic and ecclesial approach to the text of Scripture,” while for others, “the history that stretches between us and the biblical texts, including the history of the Christian church, represents a kind of desert across which the interpreter must travel to reach the springs of the texts’ original meaning.”<sup>20</sup>

Among Catholics also, there is also a growing disagreement in regard to method. The Pontifical Biblical Commission document usefully describes the range of methods and opinions. In a sense this document can be described as the most postmodernist ever to come from a Roman office; a list of options in regard to method are described, but it is not all that clear how they are to be integrated. It leaves the task of integration and discriminating assessment to practitioners.<sup>21</sup>

No doubt the differences in the roles played by the history of exegesis are significantly determined by theological and denominational differences. The confessional/denominational background of today’s scholars colors their attitude to, and use of, the history of exegesis, however much they might otherwise share critical methods or even “postcritical methods.”<sup>22</sup> It is clearly a bigger step from a *sola scriptura* background. Generally speaking, it can be said that the new interest is more evident among Protestants than among Catholics. The new interest is less striking among Catholics because they have been more consistently involved in the subject albeit under the rubric of patristics. Yet it has to be stressed that what is essentially new is that the history of exegesis is today being conducted and

<sup>20</sup> Roger Lundin, “Listening to the Community of Saints,” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 4 (July/August 1998) 30–31, at 31.

<sup>21</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993); see the text also in *Origins* 23 (January 6, 1994) 497–524. I have attempted to bring together one of the contemporary approaches, namely, reader-response theory, and the approach of the ancient allegorizing reader in order to investigate the possibility of a more sympathetic reading of the old commentaries. See Michael Cahill, “Reader-Response Criticism and the Allegorizing Reader,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 89–96.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Ochs, “An Introduction to Postcritical Interpretation,” in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation*, ed. Peter Ochs (New York: Paulist, 1993) 3–51, at 5.

assimilated by biblical scholars as distinct from patristic scholars and church historians. The new interest in the history of exegesis has a genuinely ecumenical dimension; this is a positive development. However, within all the churches there exists such differing expectations of the history of exegesis, that a more precisely defined way forward must be sketched out, even if only in rough outline.

### PROGRAMMATIC

The arrival of a new dialogue partner necessitates a new paradigm for biblical scholarship today. Probably it is still too early to attempt to define or describe rigidly what such a model should be, but a programmatic sketch can be suggested. In the attempt to locate the pertinence of the history of exegesis to the biblical scholarship of the future one can proceed negatively and positively. First, I note formulations of positions, and elements that are not acceptable, at least as a total rationale of a program even though there may be some truth or value represented by these points. I exclude the following, all of which I have noted in the current debate.

#### Program Negatively Posed

(1) “Knowing the history of exegesis will help us to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.” This view is simply too negative. Over 100 years ago, Frederic W. Farrar, in the Bampton Lectures for 1885, presented his *History of Interpretation*. This opinionated and entertaining (because of its lack of ecumenical correctness!) survey is a dismissal of most of the exegetical tradition. He wrote: “The task before us is in some respects a melancholy one. We shall pass in swift review many centuries of exegesis, and shall be compelled to see that they were, in the main, centuries during which the interpretation of Scripture has been dominated by unproven theories, and overladen by untenable results.”<sup>23</sup>

(2) “Use the ancient commentators in so far as they share our historical-critical methods.” This is a form of exegetical strip-mining or cherry-picking, commonly done by those who would claim to take cognizance of the history of exegesis. However, it is flawed methodologically. To maintain the metaphor—strip-mining does a lot of damage and a lot is discarded if it is not recognizably the product of the same method used by the scholar. In this respect it is nonhistorical in the sense that it ignores the historical situation of the source. There a filtering going on that gives rise to the question: who decides which cherries get picked?

(3) “Check the older exegetes to see if they have seen something that we

<sup>23</sup> Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1886; reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961) 8.

missed.” At first, this sounds nobly humble, but it is basically a variant of the foregoing as the same presuppositions are operating.

(4) “The history of exegesis is important because of ‘the superiority of pre-critical exegesis’.”<sup>24</sup> This principle is borrowed from the title of David C. Steinmetz’s well-known article and is frequently quoted by those who assail the validity of the historical-critical method, but in a way that does not do justice to the nuance of his argument. Yet the phrase does express a common position. In this area, comparison is indeed odious and even nonsensical. Judgments like this are notoriously difficult to make. A better way forward is to attempt to understand the exegesis of each period on its own merits and avoid playing one off against the other.

(5) “Patristic exegesis is better because it is more spiritual.” This is closely linked with the foregoing. The patristic period is frequently touted as the “golden age” of exegesis by those who repudiate or who are unhappy with the historical-critical method. Frequently it is implied that the Fathers differ from the rest of us in that they brought a more spiritual interest to bear on the text or were more influenced by the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> Such a view is simply offensive to generations of exegetes. An interest in the history of exegesis should not be allowed to degenerate into a safe haven for those terrified by the findings of the historical-critical method. Barton’s criticism is accurate: “The world of academic biblical interpretation is already trying to move people on from a position whose strength they have by no means yet grasped, and to offer instead allegedly new modes of exegesis which will allow a place of refuge within safe ‘interpretive communities’ of faith to those who do not wish to be challenged by the biblical text, despite the place of honour they claim to give it.”<sup>26</sup>

A good example of this, and indeed a prominent one, is the multi-volume series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. The position of its prime mover, Thomas C. Oden, is linked with a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the historical method and involves a “hermeneutical reversal.”<sup>27</sup> In the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, the “new modes” referred to by Barton, are the old patristic modes that are perceived as safe

<sup>24</sup> See David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (April 1980) 27–38.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see Ignace de la Potterie, “Reading Scripture ‘in the Spirit’: Is the Patristic Way of Reading the Bible Still Possible Today?” *Communio* 4 (Winter 1986) 308–25.

<sup>26</sup> John Barton, “Historical-critical Approaches,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998) 9–20, at 18.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 18. Hall goes on to speak of Oden’s journey to “paleo-orthodoxy.” His statements are based on personal interview with Oden. On another occasion, Oden stated: “There is precious little of enduring value in ex-

and superior to the modern. The problem with taking refuge in the past in this manner is that it is an abdication of our own historical setting at the beginning of yet another millennium. The patristic way of reading is neither possible nor appropriate for us today. We can live and do exegesis only in our world and time. But we can also read the Fathers and understand them and learn something from them.

### Program Positively Posed

The foregoing list, negatively posed, is at least symptomatic of a sense of unease. Undoubtedly there is a sense of being at a crossroads. George Lindbeck has written: "There seems to be no exegetical bridge between past and present. This gap, much more than questions about inerrancy or inspiration, is the heart of the current crisis of scriptural authority and the source of the conflict of interpretations."<sup>28</sup> There follows a positive programmatic proposal of how such a bridge can be put in place. This involves a strategy designed to lead to a restructuring of the relationship between the historical-critical method and the history of exegesis, taking advantage of the present postmodern culture that can provide a benign and facilitating context for this adjustment. As I have said, to expose oneself to the history of exegesis is to have a postmodernist experience—to experience what theorists talk about.

Clearly an interest in the history of exegesis does not repudiate the historical-critical method. It does not and cannot replace that method. In fact I would argue that it provides for an expansion of its use. By definition, the historical method is to be used. The program must include a demand for systematic application of historical-critical method to the various layers or periods of the history of exegesis. This is necessary in order to understand the what and the why of each period. The recovery of the history of exegesis, if correctly appropriated, will actually necessitate a resurgence of the historical-critical, not the contrary, because for the correct understanding of the principles and policies of any period and its methods, this period must be located accurately and helpfully in its historical context.<sup>29</sup> The

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egesis that was not known by the fifth century" ("Conference Conversation", in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 126).

<sup>28</sup> George Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus and Community," in *ibid.* 74–101, at 86. See also Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Chasm between Modern and Pre-modern Exegesis," *The Month* 31 (December 1998) 475–85.

<sup>29</sup> John Barton can be enlisted in support of this element of my argument: "Even the reception history of biblical texts, a burgeoning and exciting field of study, requires historical criticism—the fact that is it concerned with what texts were later taken to mean rather than what they originally meant does not make it any the less

historical method must exert itself on the components of the history of exegesis in order that each is understood in its own hermeneutical context, resulting in an adequate and appropriate interpretation. Without this control of the historical method we will be really in a thoroughly postmodernist situation.

This application of the historical-critical method to past commentary is essentially different from the cherry-picking practice noted above. The absence of the historical factor is a feature of the *Glossa ordinaria* and of its modern quasi-imitator or off-spring, the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series. While the strength of this format is precisely the egalitarian presence of the different exegetes' comments on the same page, it is the absence of any sense of historical setting or even of chronological sequence or differentiation that is its weakness. The addition of a "chronological list of persons and writings" in an appendix does not rectify the flattening of history that the commentary page-format ensures.<sup>30</sup> The format's very convenience is purchased at the price of nonhistorical or ahistorical presentation. This is the key difference between the older understanding of the history of exegesis and the model I am proposing.

The first phase of the historical-critical method is now itself part of the history of exegesis. It can now be situated in a historical setting and subjected to the same norms of interpretation. What we have seen is a historical-critical method in a very bare and narrow version precisely because its practitioners isolated themselves from the total history of the text they studied. This method is not now to be relegated to an archival status. It is not something that has been superseded. Yet its future manifestations will not be same as what has gone by. The historical-critical method will itself be challenged and modified by interaction with the new dialogue partner.

Steinmetz draws our attention to the fact that the medieval multiplicity of meanings is comparable to the view put forward today in literary theory.

The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the theory of truth can endlessly deferred.<sup>31</sup>

Steinmetz's view certainly suggests an area for improvement on the part of the historical-critical method, but his assertion needs to be qualified in one

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a historical investigation" ("Historical-Critical Approaches," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* 9–19, at 18).

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., *Mark*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* NT 2, 261–62.

<sup>31</sup> Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis" 37–38.

important area. The insistence of the historical critic that the author's intended meaning is important is not to be lightly dismissed. The intentionality of the author that is a major preoccupation of the historical critics remains a valid interest and a very necessary one. For example, in the case of Paul, it is necessary that we know as clearly as possible what he meant. One could say that what Paul actually meant to say is at the heart of the Reformation debate and struggle. Though Jesus is not strictly an author, likewise, as a matter of historical record, one might wish to determine precisely what Jesus' teaching on divorce was. The "nature of the text" that Steinmetz speaks of is the key issue. Authorial presence is a very difficult concept in regard to the "nature" of many biblical texts. Given the story of the development and transmission of these texts, it simply is not the appropriate entry point. To the extent that a single sense (that of the original author) was a presupposition of the historical-critical approach in regard to all texts, the method needs modification.

The intentionality of the author takes on an especially problematic force when the author in question is named as God. A great part of the history of exegesis witnesses to the search for the intentionality of the divine author. This is intrinsically linked to the issue of the "spiritual" sense understood as the only one worthy of this divine author. Historical critics presume that the literal meaning of the Bible is essentially spiritual. The history of exegesis reveals the equivocal and ambiguous nature of the term "spiritual." Differing methods of exegesis commonly derive from differing understandings of the nature and function of the biblical text precisely as text. A common presupposition among the ancient commentators is that there must be more under the surface of the text. It is not that they did not understand that the biblical statement was of itself spiritual, but they were convinced, because of their cultural and philosophical view of text, that there had to be another level. The crucial question is, where did they get this other level of meaning. I have suggested elsewhere that if this meaning can be seen as derived from elsewhere in the Bible, as more often than not it is, then we are faced with a meaning that can be labeled "biblical."<sup>32</sup>

The most relevant, and to some the most disconcerting, aspect of postmodernism is the insistence on plurality and polyvalence. Yet this should not cause postmodernism to be a bogey man. Plurality of meanings is something that has been advanced by other factors and by other theorists. A tabling of the succession of the readings that the history of exegesis makes available is nothing but a concrete illustration of the insight expressed as the "sociology of knowledge." To read in the company of earlier

<sup>32</sup> Michael Cahill, "Reader-Response Criticism and the Allegorizing Reader." Here I make the case for the way the allegorizing reader/commentator should be read.

commentators is to lay our “pre-understanding” open to challenge as effectively as any “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Similarly, David Tracy’s description of the classic as a text that bears an excess of meaning and that resists definitive interpretation would seem to apply to the text of the Bible. Those who cut their literary teeth on William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) cannot but read biblical texts with the same openness to possibilities of meaning. Suggestions of ambiguity in texts will always be especially disturbing to those who read them intent only on doctrinal clarity. Postmodernism is something that can be subjected to analysis by the historical-critical method like any other period or movement. It is the historical-critical method that can control and challenge extreme relativities and irrationality, just as it can control the relativities, often very disconcerting, exposed by the history of exegesis. Historical-critical analysis will ensure that the virtues of postmodernism, including, for example, hard-nosed challenging of facile dogmatism, will be preserved and its weaknesses, for example the tendency to irrationality, curbed.

An essential element in the proposed program is that no period is to be rated better and none worse than any other in an a priori manner. The history of exegesis allows all to speak though without any guarantee of eventual endorsement. The particular contribution in a specific area may and must be rated on its merits. Many recent histories deal only with the critical period or give relatively little space to earlier periods. Similarly, the exclusive focusing on the patristic period appears to be analogous to the “canon within the canon” tendency.<sup>33</sup>

The truly novel element in the program must be recognized. The history of exegesis will be conducted by biblical scholars. Up to now the history of exegesis has been done by the historical theologians, patristic and others. History of exegesis done by biblical scholars is not the same as that done by a patristic scholar analyzing how a particular Father handled Scripture.

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted to provide a hermeneutical rationale for the recovery of the history of exegesis as an integral part of theological and biblical scholarship. The attempt to formulate a program is fueled by the conviction that the extant exegesis of two thousand years (three thousand if one includes the “intertextuality” of the Old Testament) must be presumed to

<sup>33</sup> A study of the texts that were attended to and went forward in the living tradition must be accompanied by an awareness of which texts were filtered out and ignored. Also to be looked at is which commentators have been ignored because of their identity and status.

have meaning. The history of exegesis draws attention to the interpretative communities of the past.<sup>34</sup> The Proteus of the history of exegesis will be tamed and made to speak by means of the historical-critical method. To adopt a roundtable image, I invite the history of exegesis to join us at the table of our scholarly enterprise as a welcome guest. The different voices and periods of history of exegesis can scarcely be all summed in the persona of one single guest. Many have to be invited. Each guest needs to be listened to appropriately (whence the need for the application of the historical-critical method for each). Each voice needs to be listened to differently. This involves no simplistic approving endorsement but an attempt to penetrate to the core of what can be identified as an authentic biblical sense, even if oblique (and even ironic).

The exegetes of the past are not gate-crashers. If welcome guests, then a new etiquette will be required. Order will be maintained through rules of procedure. I do not envisage a roundtable of absolute equality. This will be a roundtable that welcomes any exegetes who see themselves as part of the history—even the very recent history—of exegesis. The model I propose has the historical-critical method retaining the post of chairperson, but a chairperson who will have to face challenges.<sup>35</sup> The history of exegesis will act as a catalyst within biblical studies and will influence the historical-critical method to change in some ways. That seems inevitable, though it is

<sup>34</sup> I take the phrase from the suggestive subtitle of Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1980).

<sup>35</sup> My position here is substantially different from the position taken against "the primacy of the historical-critical method" by Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, in an article with a thoroughly postmodernist title, "(Mis)reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999) 513–28. While the authors' primary intent is to refute the Christological analogy used in the Pontifical Biblical Commission document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, their (mis)reading of the text of Augustine, the source of their title, is a vivid illustration of the indispensability of the historical-critical method when involved in the history of exegesis (see 513, n. 2). The authenticity of this particular sermon of Augustine is highly questionable; the image of Scripture as the face of God is nowhere else found in Augustine. In this sermon on Psalm 67 (Vulgate), the preacher is following the lead of the imagery of verse three, that has the sinner melting like wax before the face of God; this is reinforced by the introduction of other such "heat-imagery" from Psalm 19:6 and Romans 12:11. The preacher is involved literally in a "fervorino" as he urges the congregation likewise to melt before the Scripture of God. To take this image out of context and posit it as the hermeneutical position of Augustine on the Bible is to misrepresent it in historical-critical terms. In fact, the key term in the quotation from Augustine is "interim," a term much used by Augustine, denoting, among other things, the present historical situation of humanity. Augustine was eminently aware of the historically conditioned nature of humanity and of the Scripture of God.

hard to say what will happen. Certainly absolutes will be challenged. History need not depreciate any approach, but should certainly relativize. To use another image: The goal is to bring about a coming together between the historical-critical method and the history of exegesis—however tautological that sounds—perhaps through genetic engineering or at least an arranged marriage, leading to a fertile exegetical future. The way forward is not made any easier by the facile rejection of the positive gains of the Enlightenment, modernism, and postmodernism. The historical-critical method need not be repudiated, while postmodernism promotes a certain democratic perspective. One can see that an interest in the history of exegesis, along with a willingness to consider all and any new approaches, will survive and develop more readily in an atmosphere where one method or system does not rule the roost in a dictatorial manner. The essential thing is that the discipline of biblical studies will retain the characteristics of being both more inclusively historical and no less critical.